

MERCHANTS QUAY IRELAND

Drug-related Attitudes and Beliefs in Ireland Survey

April 2025



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MQI Attitudinal Survey Report |
April 2025



Merchants Quay Ireland
Homeless & Drugs Services

Introduction

Research objectives

Stigma, as first conceptualised by Goffman (1963), can be described as a socially constructed mark that excludes individuals from full societal acceptance. This idea was expanded by Jones et al. (1984) and Link & Phelan (2001), who emphasized stigma's roots in shifting social norms and power structures. The Tripartite Model of attitudes—comprising thoughts, emotions, and behaviours—has been used to frame stigma in terms of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. While early models focused on the perspective of the stigmatiser, more recent frameworks have addressed the experiences of stigmatised individuals. Corrigan et al. (2010) introduced the concepts of public stigma and self-stigma, highlighting how societal views can be internalised. Building on this, Fox et al. (2018) proposed a more nuanced model that includes internalized, anticipated, and experienced stigma, offering a comprehensive understanding of how stigma operates both socially and psychologically.

Drug use and dependency stigma involves negative beliefs and attitudes about people who are drug dependent, such as a person who is drug dependent is automatically dangerous, unpredictable, or irresponsible. The language we use to address people who use drugs (PWUDs) can have lasting damaging effects; words such as “drug abuser” and “addict” carry negative associations. When PWUDs adopt or internalise these words, they are likely to experience self-stigma and accept that they cannot recover. Stigmatising attitudes may result in the stigmatiser avoiding people who are drug dependent due to fear, disgust, pity, or anger. However, this may further decrease the social network of people who are drug dependent. This may lead to withdrawal or isolation, less work or community opportunities, relationship problems, a decrease in treatment time and engagement, increased susceptibility to bullying or harassment, and a reduced sense of hope. Such views are often linked with the concept of moral failing rather than a health issue (Abuse, 2021; Stigma, n.d.).

Bryan et al. (2000) conducted a 1998 nationwide public knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs survey (KABS) toward drug use in Ireland through face-to-face interviews with 1,000 randomly selected individuals. The findings highlighted that public concern about drug issues was high, with three-quarters believing the drug situation was out of control. Alcohol abuse was also seen as a major societal problem, with over half of the respondents viewing it as more harmful than illegal drugs. Sympathy for people who are drug dependent was limited, though individuals with personal connections to someone with a drug problem tended to express more compassionate views. Despite these mixed attitudes, there was strong public support for prevention and harm reduction strategies, including methadone programs and needle exchange services. 25 years on, Merchants Quay Ireland wished to understand the general public's perspectives towards people with drug dependency or PWUD by undertaking a partial replication of Bryan et al. (2000) survey.

Introduction



Research objectives

Merchants Quay Ireland wished to understand the general public's perspectives towards people who use drugs or are drug dependent through a range of attitudinal statements sourced from Bryan et al. (2000) study. The language used within the question statements were not modified for direct comparison.. MQI advocates for person first, stigma reduction language. Language was informed by Uisce, Advocacy For People Who Use Drugs, Ireland.



Methodology

Ipsos B&A's nationally representative face to face barometer survey was utilised.



Sample

Ipsos B&A's face to face barometer is conducted amongst a sample size of 1,000 adults, aged 16+. All interviews were conducted in respondents' own homes using CAPI (tablets) machines. The sample was quota controlled in terms of gender, age, socio-economic status, region, and area and data weighted to population estimates.



Fieldwork

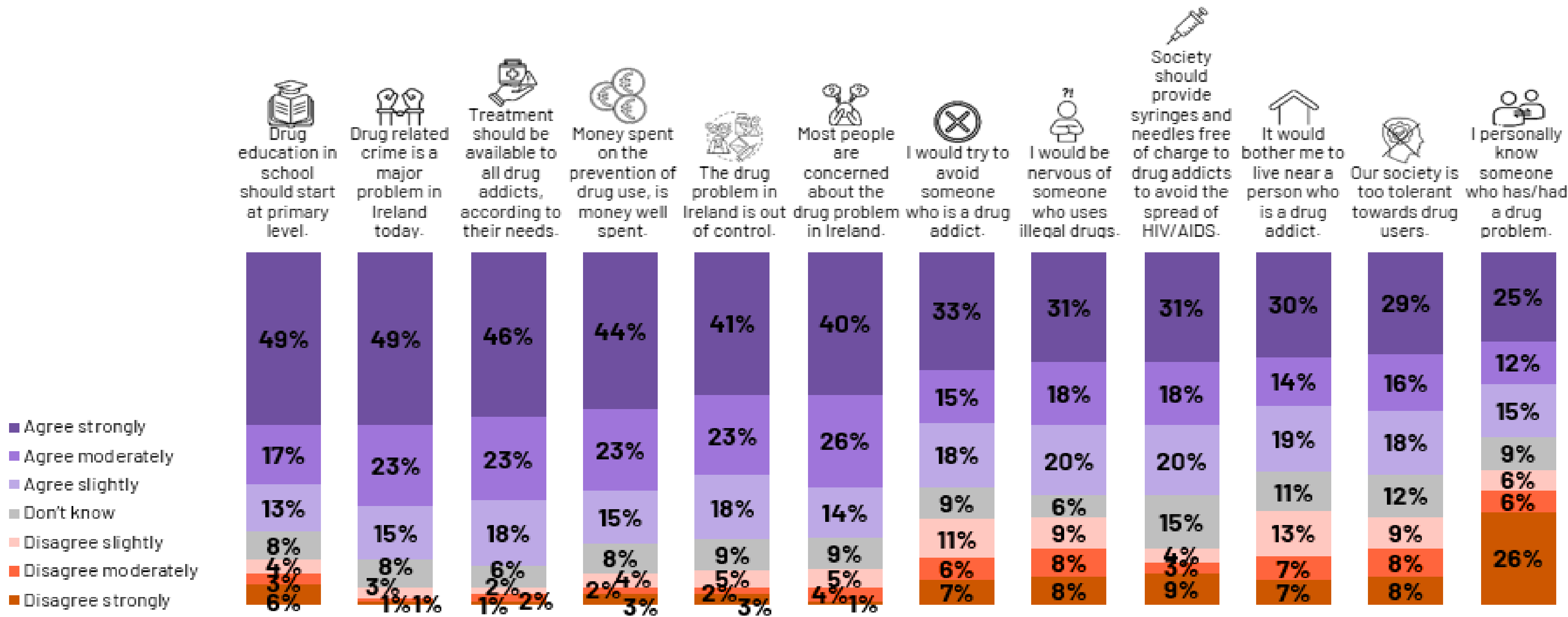
28 March to 9 April 2025

Key Findings

Public Perception of Drug Problem and Crime	Attitudes Towards People who are Drug Dependent	Approaches to Drug Problem	Personal Experience with Drug Use or Dependency	Alcohol vs. Drugs
Most respondents consider drug-related crime a major problem in Ireland, especially those over 65. A majority are concerned about the drug problem, with women and older people more likely to believe it's out of control. However, many feel drugs aren't a significant issue in their own neighbourhood.	While there's broad support for providing treatment based on need, mixed opinions exist on whether treatment should be limited to those intending to quit entirely. A slight majority disagree that people who are drug dependent are solely to blame for their problems, and roughly 3 in 5 don't believe all people with drug dependency are dangerous. However, apprehension exists, with older people and women expressing more nervousness and fear around people who use or who are drug dependent..	There's widespread support for drug education beginning in primary school and for spending money on prevention. While a third see people who are drug dependent more as criminals than victims, two-thirds believe society is too tolerant of people who use drugs, and a smaller proportion favour tougher sentences for people who misuse drugs, particularly among older respondents. A majority support providing clean needles/syringes to prevent HIV/AIDS and medically prescribed heroin substitutes.	Roughly half of respondents personally know someone with a past or present drug problem, most commonly those aged 25-49.	Across all demographics, the majority believe alcohol abuse causes more societal problems than drug abuse

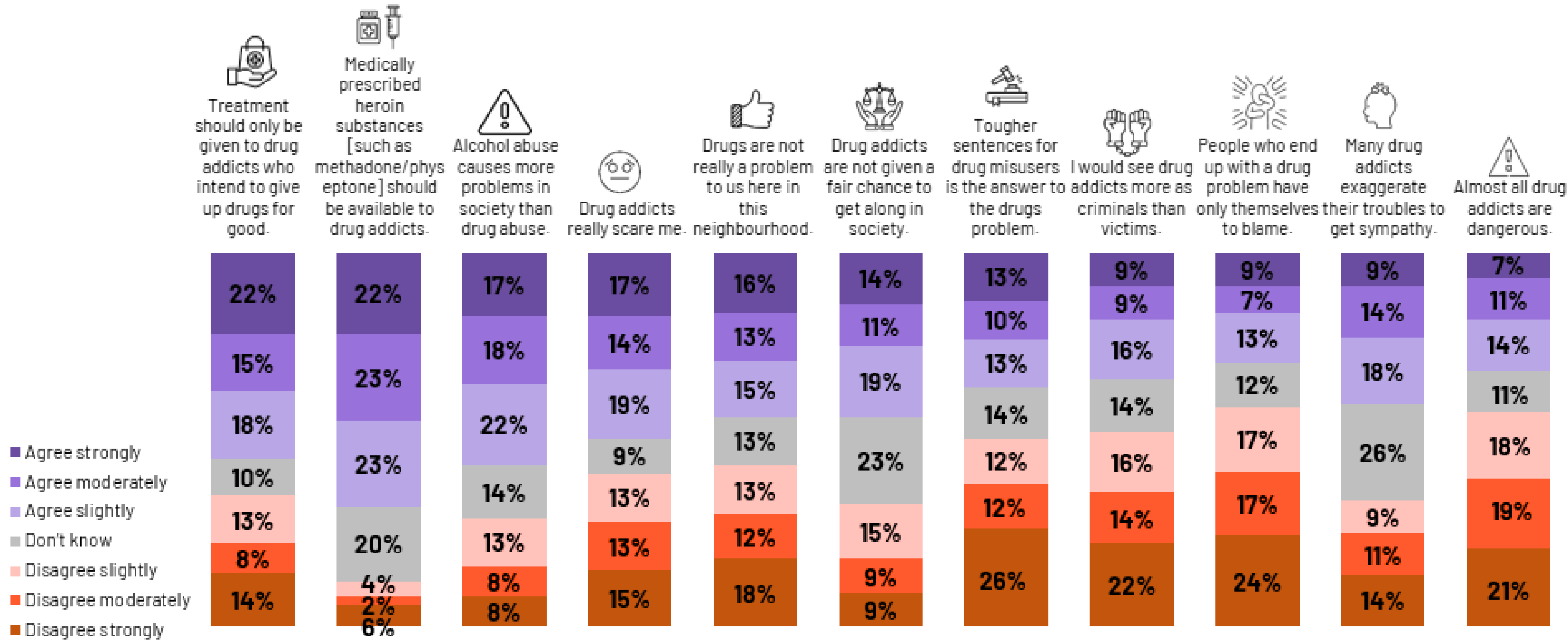
Attitudes to drug usage - Summary

Widespread agreement that drug related crime is a major problem, with strong majorities believing that education should start at an early age and treatment should be broadly available



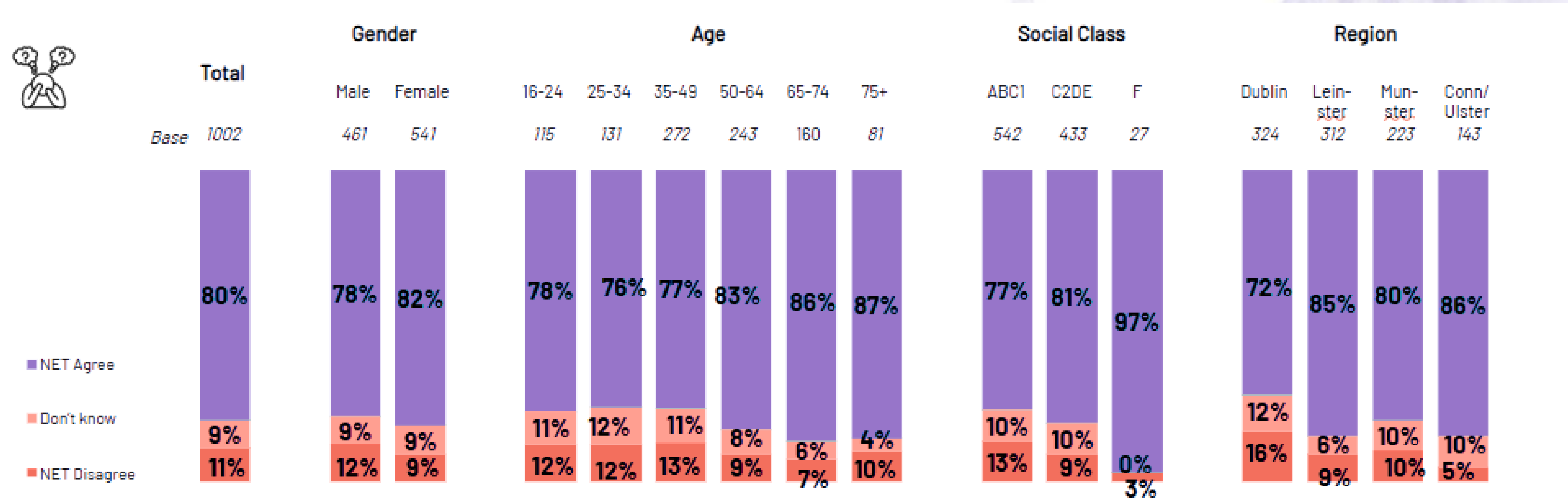
Attitudes to drug usage - Summary

Roughly a third see people who are drug dependent as criminals rather than victims, however a slight majority disagree with this sentiment



Most people are concerned about the drug problem in Ireland.

General perception that most people are concerned about the drug problem in Ireland

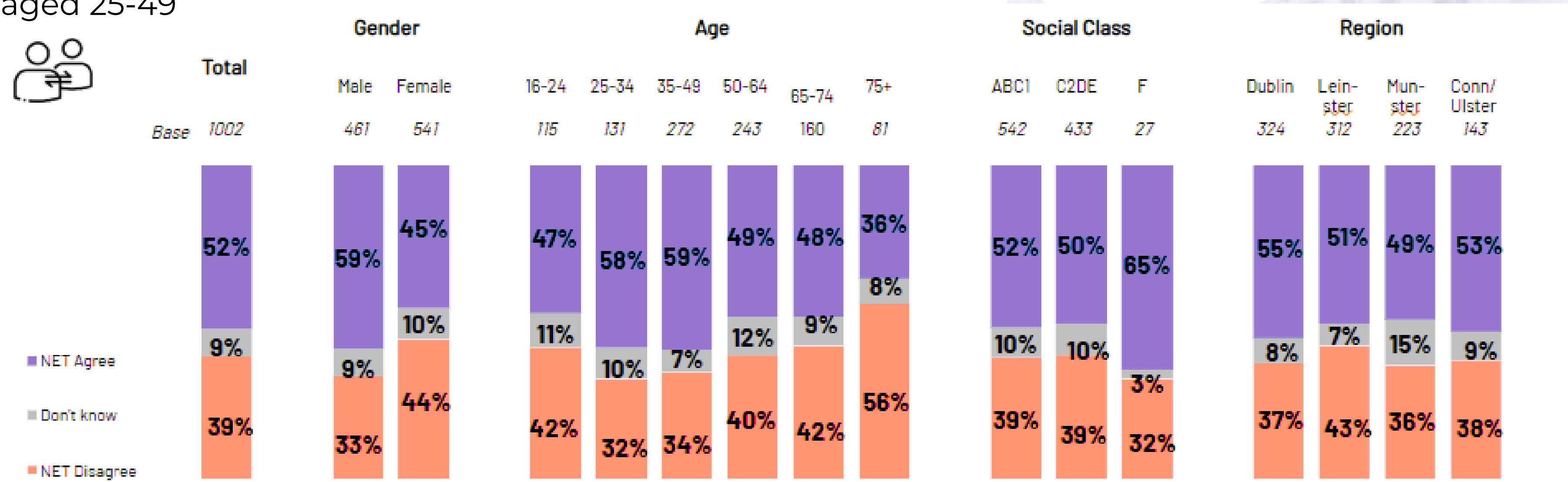


Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q21. Most people are concerned about the drug problem in Ireland.

Base: All Adults N - 1002

I personally know someone who has/had a drug problem.

Roughly half have personal experience with someone with a drug problem, highest among those aged 25-49



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q39. I personally know someone who has/had a drug problem.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Concern about the drug problem and personal connection to someone who has had a drug problem

There has been a decrease in the belief that most people are concerned about the drug problem in Ireland from 91% to 80%. However, the number of people who report personally knowing someone who has/had a drug problem has increased by 50% from 26% to 39%.

Statement	KABS 2000 (%)			ABS 2025 (%)			Change
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	
Most people are concerned about the drug problem in Ireland	91%	5.2%	3.8%	80%	11%	9%	↓ Decrease
I personally know someone who has/had a drug problem.	25.7%	74.3%	N/A	52%	39%	9%	↑ Increase

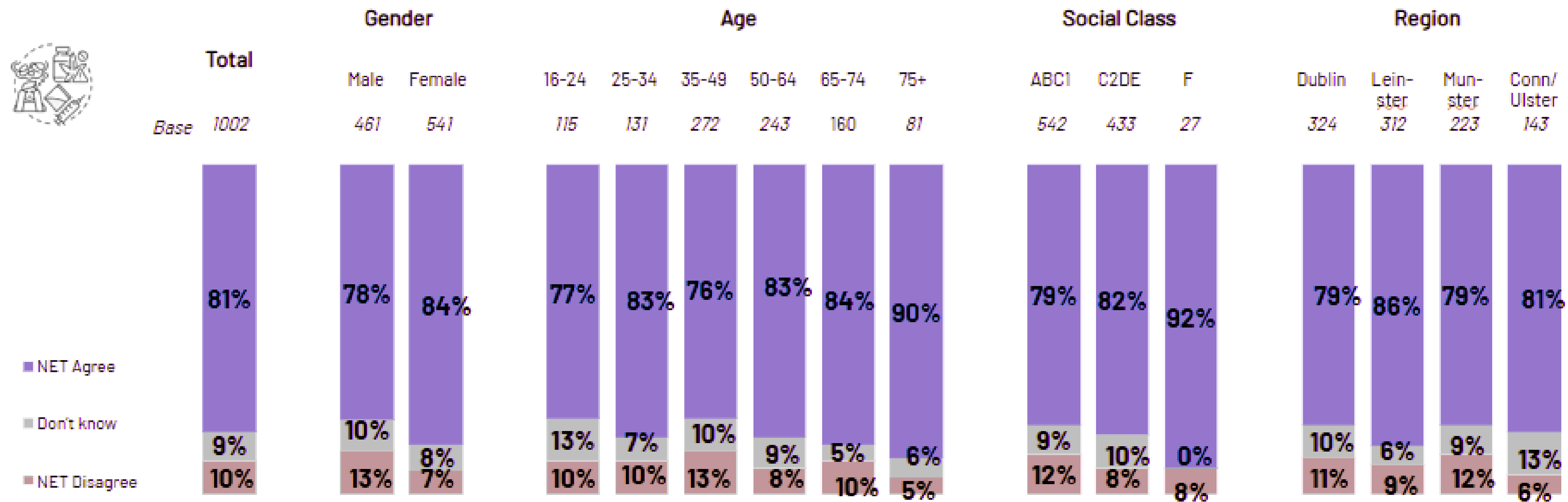
THE PERCEIVED EXTENT AND NATURE OF THE DRUG PROBLEM IN IRELAND

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The drug problem in Ireland is out of control.

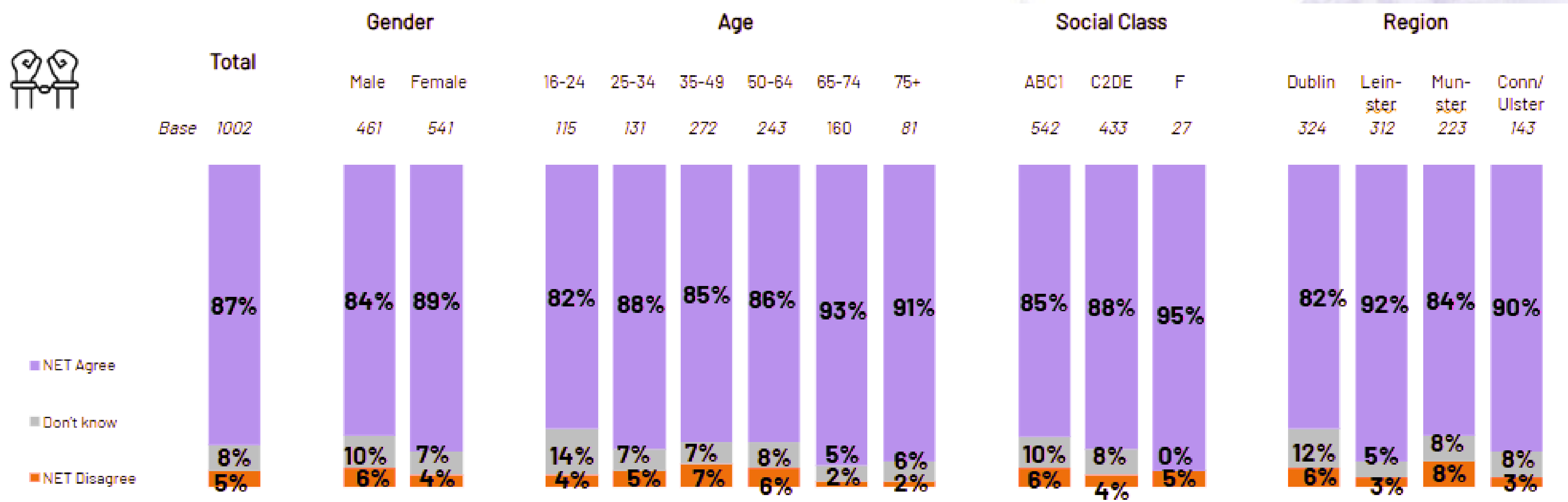
Women and older people more likely to feel that the drug problem in Ireland is out of control



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q25. The drug problem in Ireland is out of control.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Drug related crime is a major problem in Ireland today.

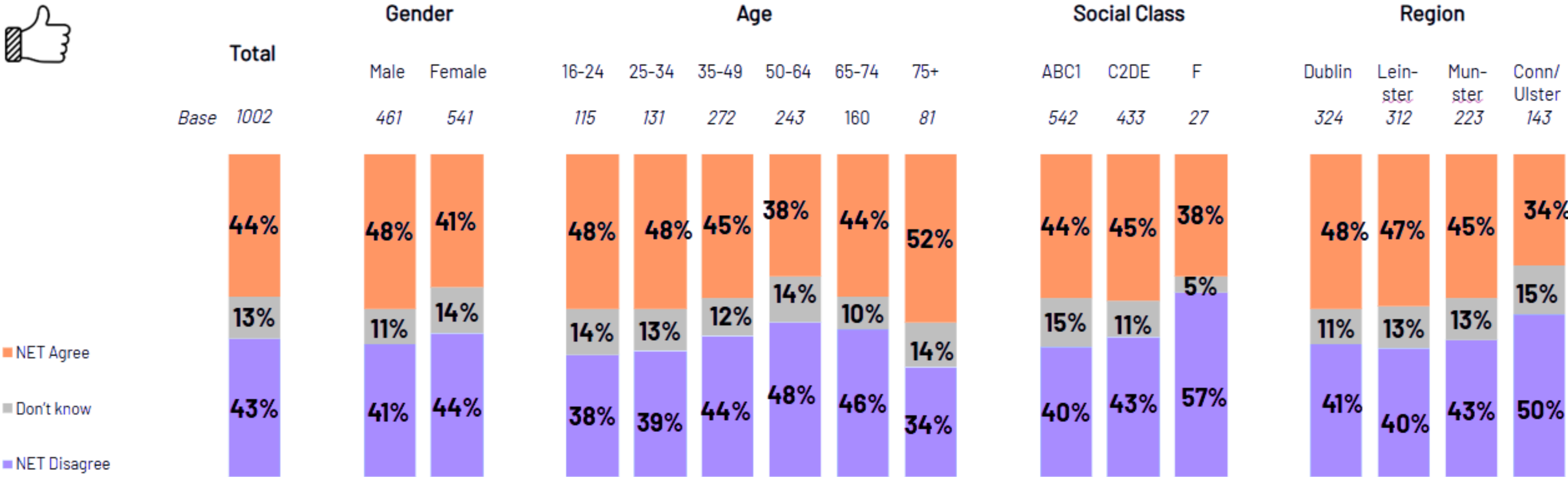
Over 9 out of 10 people aged 65 and older feel that drug related crime is a major problem, compared with roughly 8 out of 10 under -25s



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q29. Drug-related crime is a major problem in Ireland today.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Drugs are not really a problem to us here in this neighbourhood.

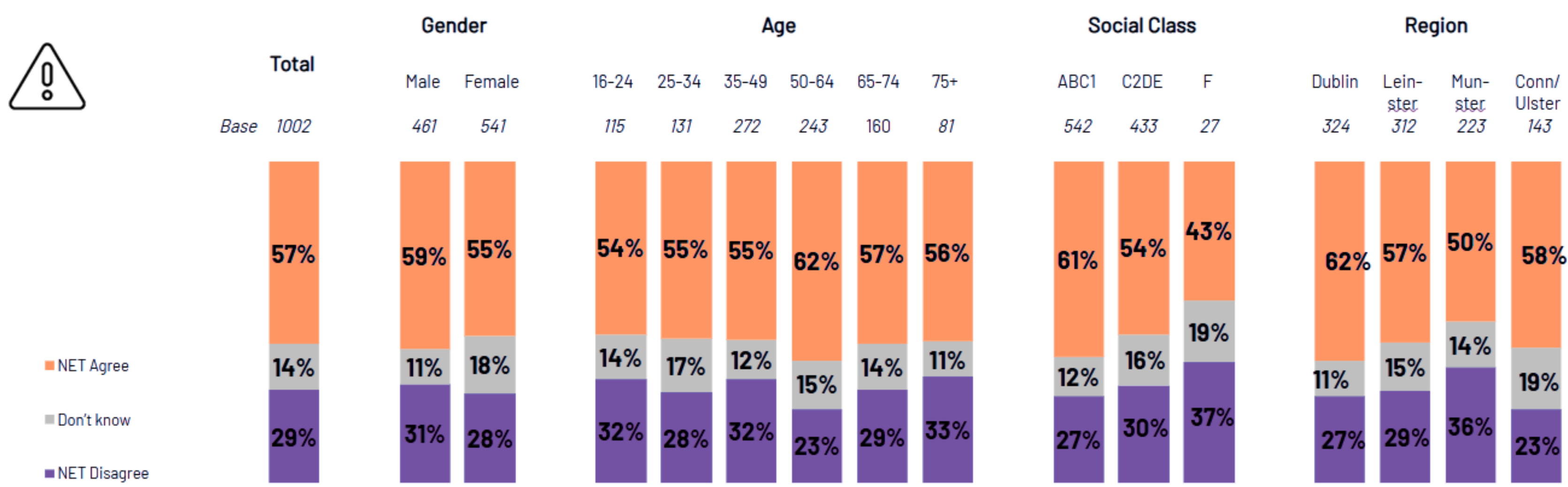
General agreement across most regions that drugs are not really a problem in their neighbourhood, however those living in Connacht/Ulster are less likely to hold this view



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q17. Drugs are not really a problem to us here in this neighbourhood.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Alcohol abuse causes more problems in society than drug abuse.

The majority of all gender and age groups believe that alcohol abuse is more problematic in society than drug abuse



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q7. Alcohol abuse causes more problems in society than drug abuse.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

The Perceived Extent of the Drug Problem in Ireland

Since 2000 concern about drug-related crime has slightly decreased; however, the perception that the drug problem is out of control has increased. There has been a slight change in the perception of drugs being a problem in neighbourhoods. Alcohol use continues to be seen as a pressing issue, with alcohol use causing more problems than drug use.

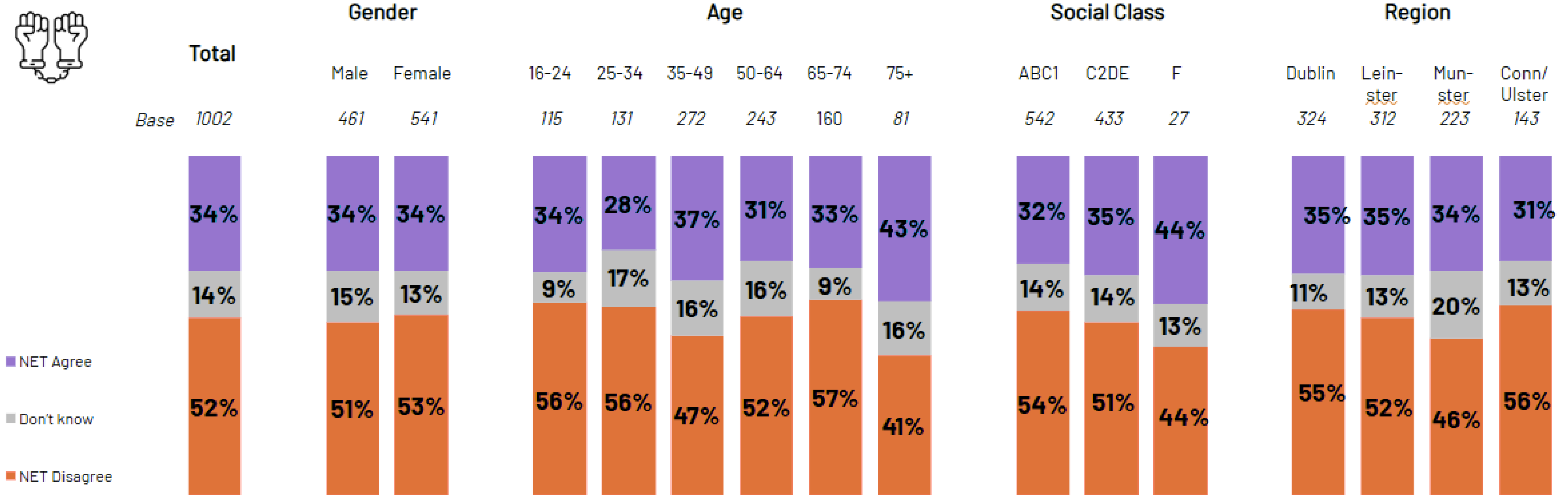
Statement	KABS 2000 (%)			ABS 2025 (%)			Change
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	
The drug problem in Ireland is out of control.	75.0	15.1	9.9	81	10	9	↑ Increase
Drug related crime is a major problem in Ireland today.	94.4	2.0	3.6	87	5	8	↓ Decrease
Drugs are not really a problem to us here in this neighbourhood	46.9	38.7	14.3	44	43	13	↓ Slight decrease
Alcohol abuse causes more problems in society than drug abuse.	56.1	30.5	13.4	57	29	14	↔ Stable

ATTITUDES TOWARDS DRUG- DEPENDENT INDIVIDUALS

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I would see people who are drug dependent more as criminals than victims..

Roughly a third see people who are drug dependent more as criminals than victims

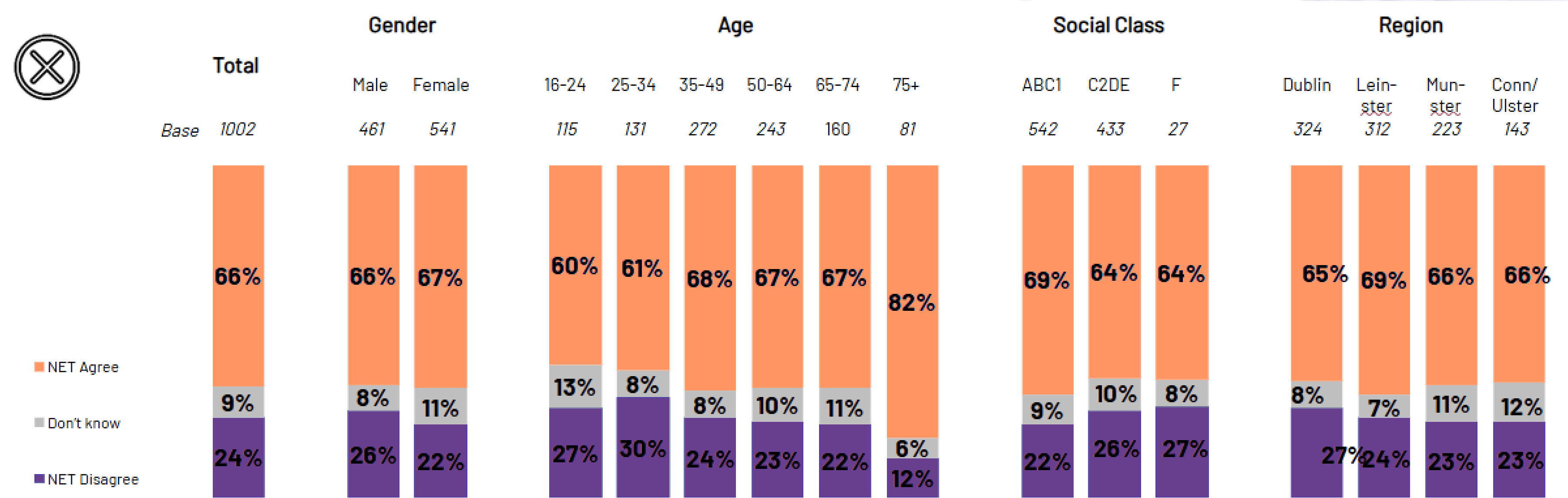


Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q5. I would see drug addicts more as criminals than victims.

Base: All Adults N - 1002

I would tend to avoid someone who is a drug dependent.

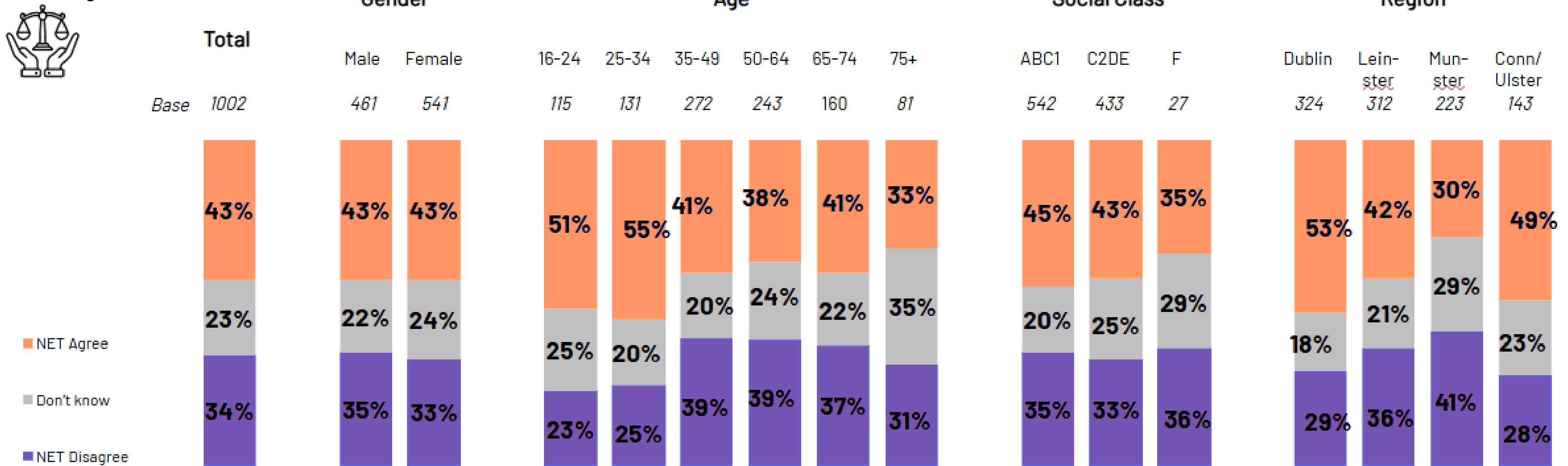
Strong lifestage differences in likelihood to avoid someone who is a drug dependent with younger people less likely to hold this view



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q9. I would tend to avoid someone who is a drug addict.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

People who are drug dependent are not given a fair chance to get along in society.

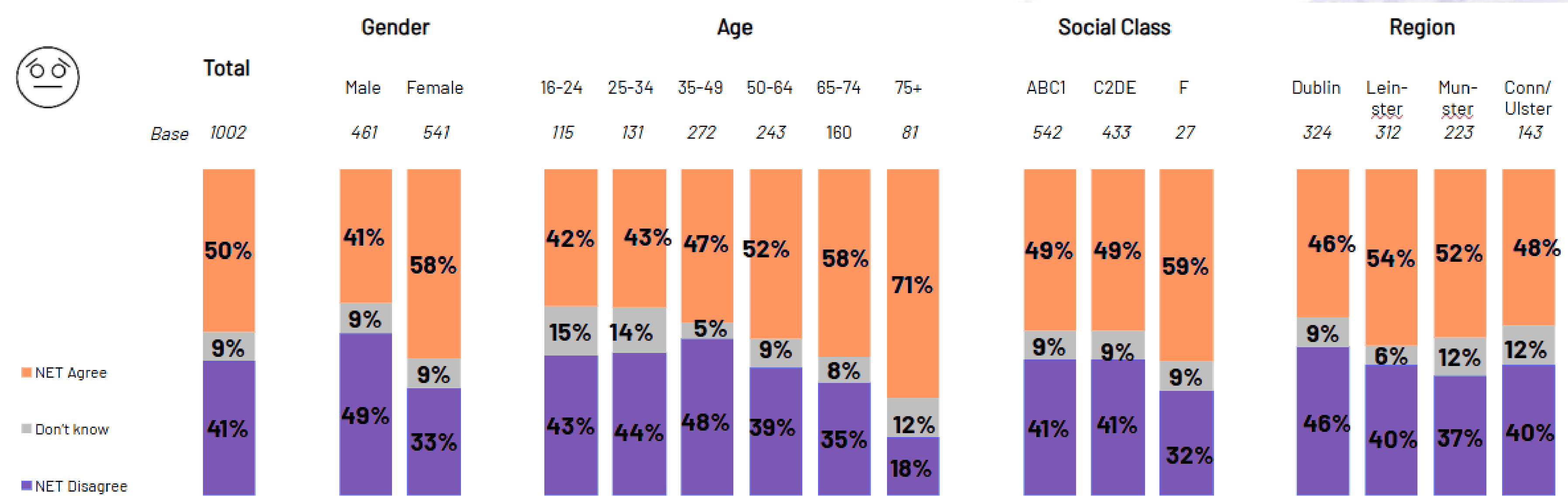
A majority of under-35s feel that people who are drug dependent are not given a fair chance to progress in society



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q13. Drug addicts are not given a fair chance to get along in society.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

people who are drug dependent really scare me.

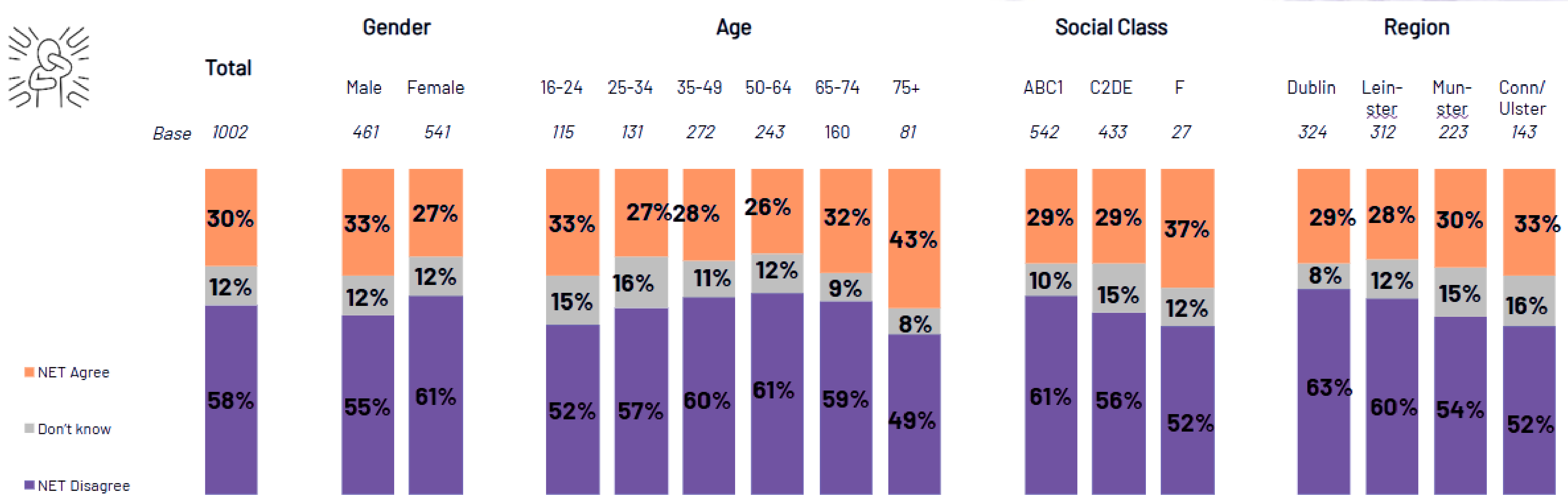
While roughly two-thirds of over 65s say they feel scared by people who are drug dependent , this attitude declines to roughly two out of five 16-34 year olds



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q19. Drug addicts really scare me.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

People who end up with a drug problem have only themselves to blame.

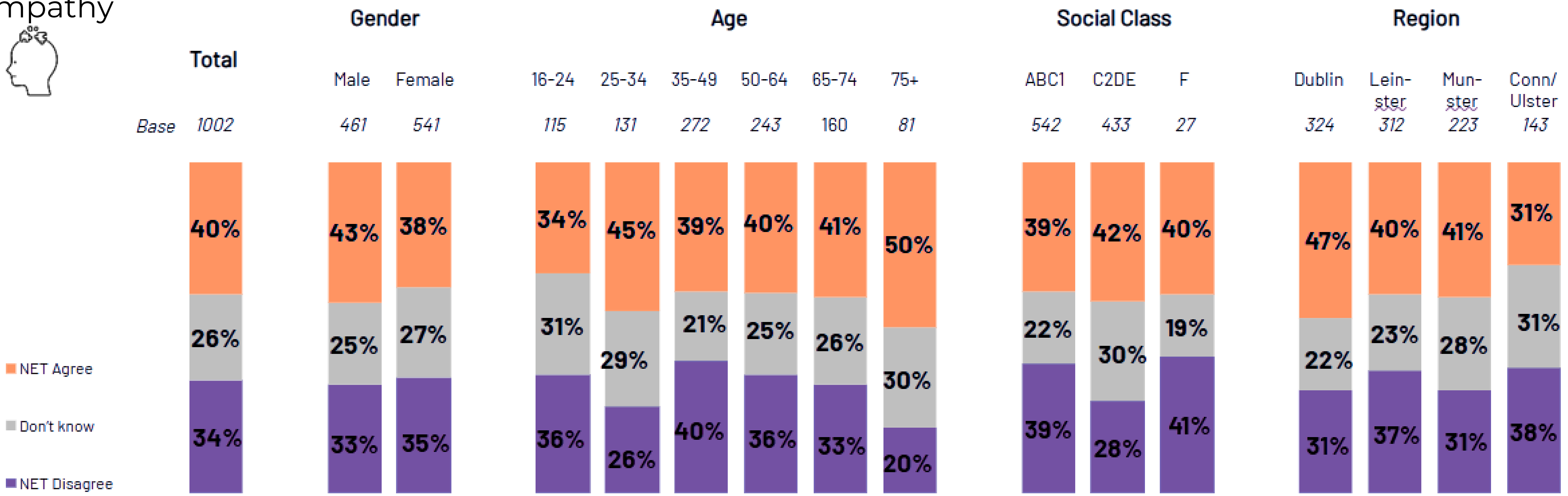
A majority disagree that people who use drugs only have themselves to blame



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q15. People who end up with a drug problem have only themselves to blame.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Many people who are drug dependent exaggerate their troubles to get sympathy.

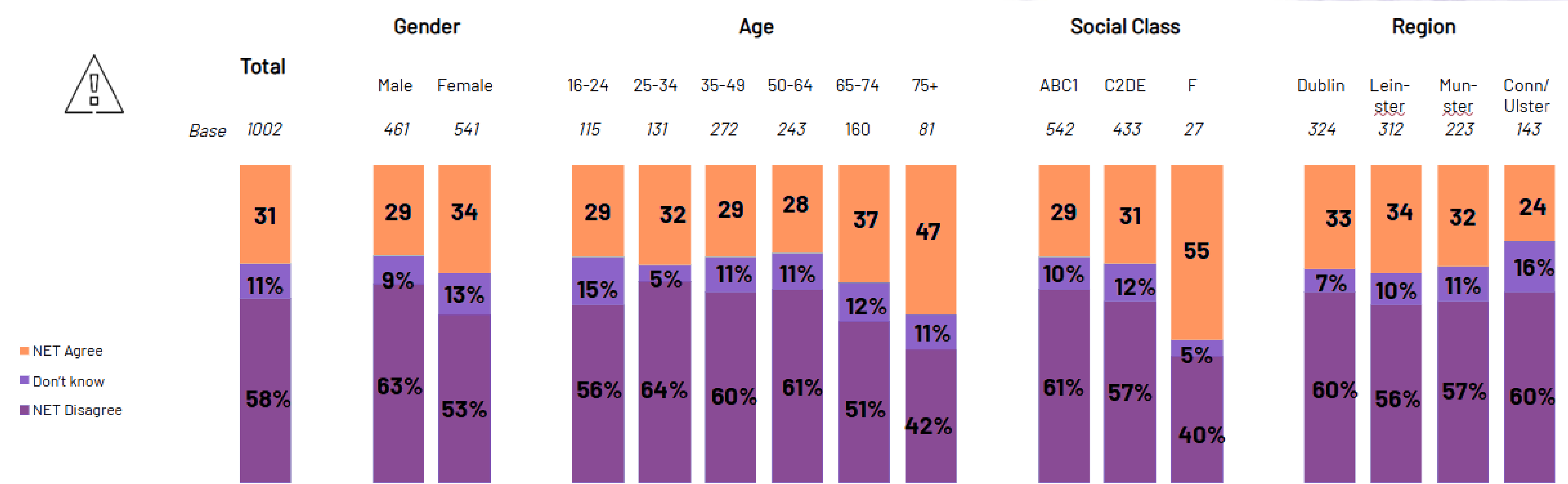
Two out of every five people feel that people who are drug dependent exaggerate their troubles to get sympathy



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q23. Many drug addicts exaggerate their troubles to get sympathy.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Almost all people who are drug dependent are dangerous.

Roughly 3 out of 5 disagree that almost all people who are drug dependent are dangerous, however older people are more likely to agree with this sentiment



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q27. Almost all drug addicts are dangerous.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Attitudes towards people who are drug dependent

There has been a notable reduction in stigma, with fewer people viewing people who are drug dependent as criminals, dangerous or to blame for their dependency. This suggests a growing public understanding of drug use and dependency as a health issue rather than a moral failing.

Statement	KABS 2000 (%)			ABS 2025 (%)			Agreed Change
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	
I would see drug addicts more as criminals than victims.	42.6	45.2	12.1	34	52	14	↓ Decrease
I would tend to avoid someone who is a drug addict.	71.1	21.6	7.3	66	24	9	↓ Slight decrease
Drug addicts are not given a fair chance to get along in society.	30.5	50.7	18.8	43	34	23	↑ Increase
Drug addicts really scare me.	66.4	26	7.6	50	41	9	↓ Large decrease

Attitudes towards people who are drug dependent

There is a shift away from punitive attitudes toward more nuanced views on drug use.

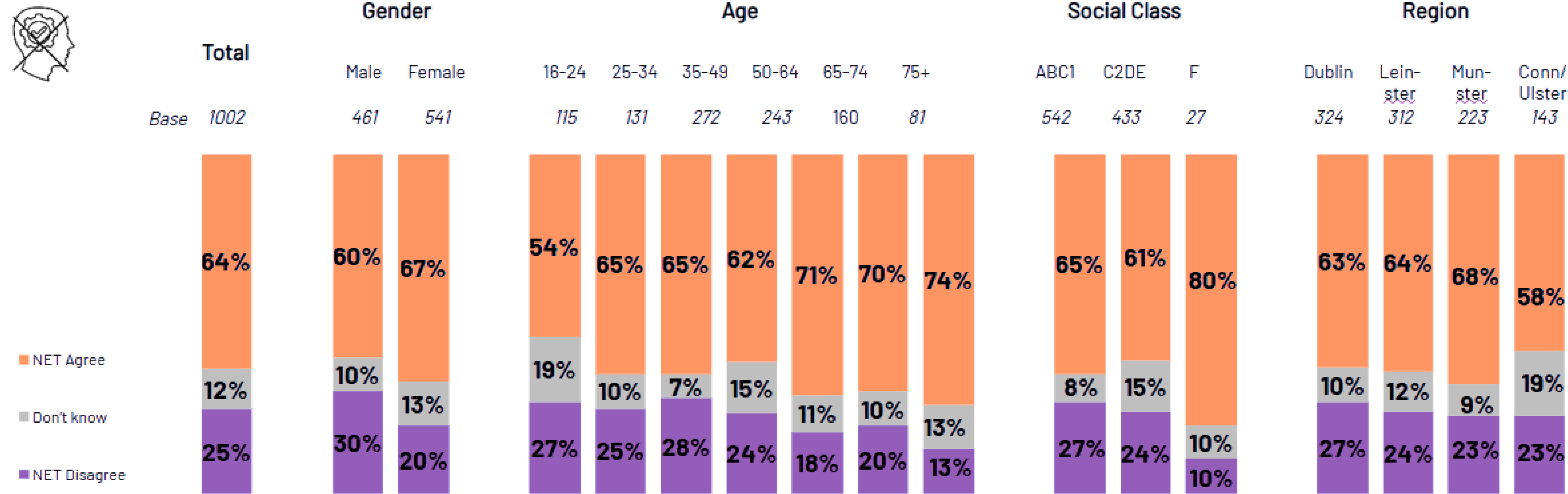
Statement	KABS 2000 (%)			ABS 2025 (%)			Agreed Change
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	
People who end up with a drug problem have only themselves to blame.	56.9	33.9	9.2	30	58	12	↓ Large decrease
Many drug addicts exaggerate their troubles to get sympathy.	39.7	29.1	21.3	40	34	26	↔ Stable
Almost all drug addicts are dangerous.	52.5	34.7	12.8	31	58	11	↓ Large decrease
It would bother me to live near a person who is a drug addict.	69.9	22.4	7.6	63	27	11	↓ Small decrease

ATTITUDES TOWARDS PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

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Our society is too tolerant towards people who use drugs.

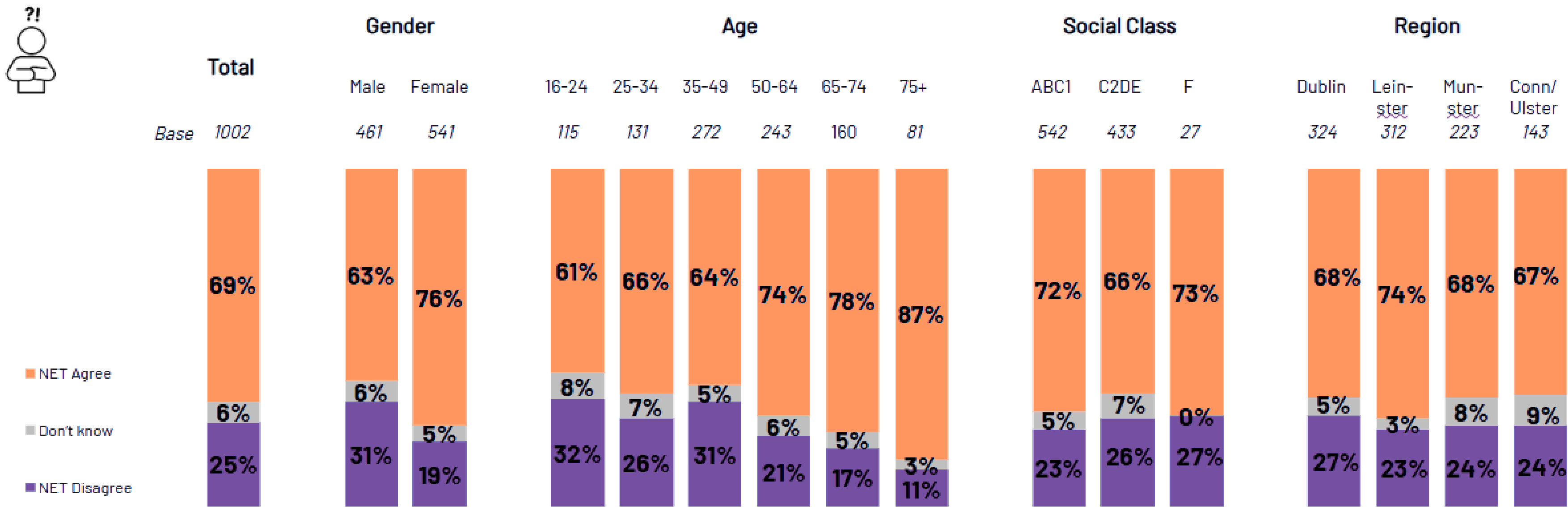
Roughly two-thirds believe society is too tolerant towards people who use drugs, with this view held most strongly among older people



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q3. Our society is too tolerant towards drug users.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

I would be nervous of someone who uses illegal drugs.

Women and older people more likely to be nervous of someone who uses illegal drugs, however the majority of all groups indicate reservations in this regard

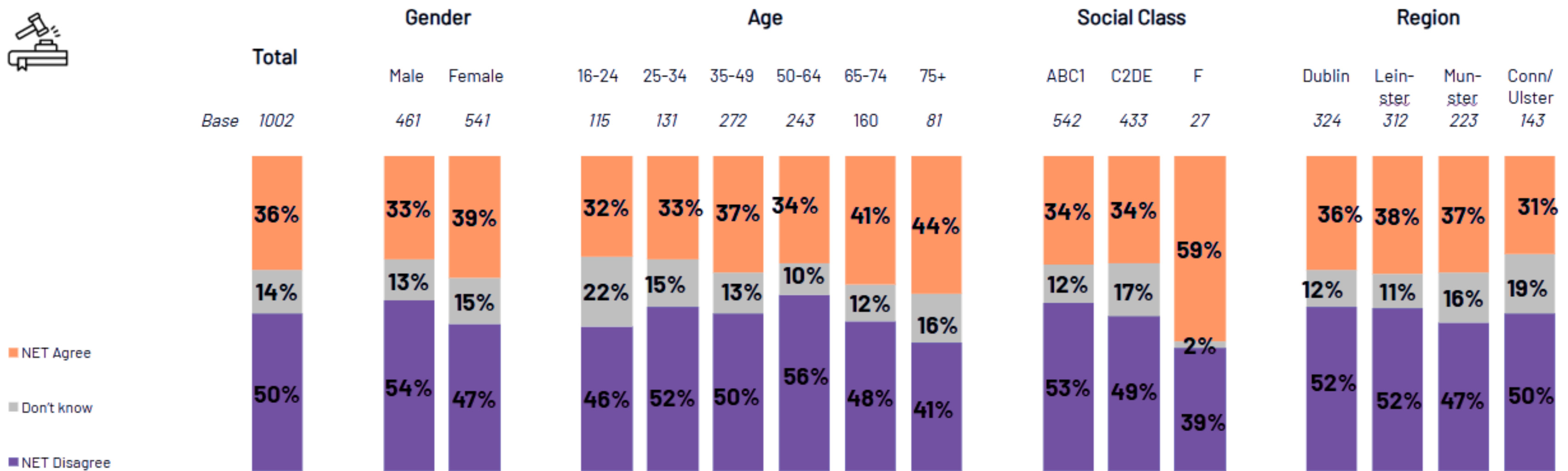


Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q10. I would be nervous of someone who uses illegal drugs.

Base: All Adults N - 1002

Tougher sentences for people who use drugs is the answer to the drugs problem.

While just over a third generally feel that tougher prison sentences is part of the response, older people are more likely to seek this punishment-based approach



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q20. Tougher sentences for drug misusers is the answer to the drugs problem.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Attitudes Toward People Who Use Drugs

There is a clear shift away from punitive attitudes toward more nuanced views on drug use.

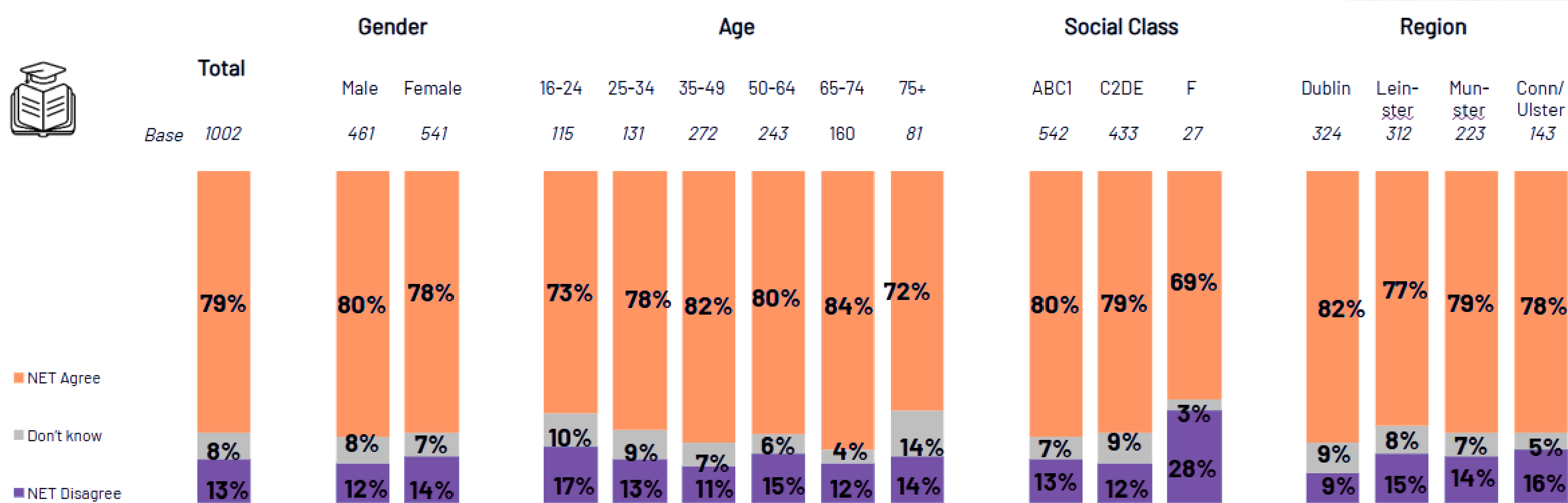
Statement	KABS 2000 (%)			ABS 2025 (%)			Agreed Change
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	
Our society is too tolerant towards drug users.	70	21.1	8.7	64	25	12	↓ Decrease
I would be nervous of someone who uses illegal drugs.	75.5	19.1	5.4	69	25	6	↓ Decrease
Tougher sentences for drug misusers is the answer to the drugs problem.	51.3	37.7	11	36	50	14	↓ Large decrease

SUPPORT FOR CURRENT MEASURES AND POLICIES TO ALLEVIATE THE DRUG PROBLEM

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Drug education in school should start at primary level.

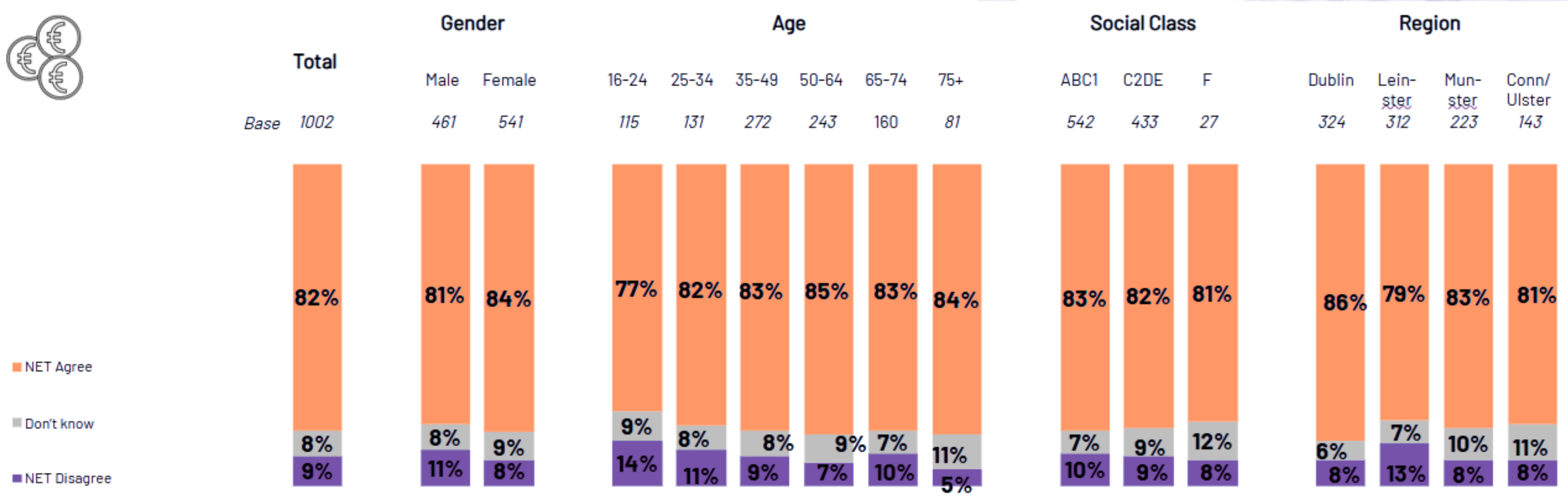
Widespread agreement across all groups that drug education should start in primary school



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q28. Drug education in school should start at primary level.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Money spent on the prevention of drug use, is money well spent.

Attitudes towards investment in prevention of drug use broadly aligned with perceptions of the extent of the drug problem in Ireland with older people more likely to agree with spending money in this regard



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q11. Money spent on the prevention of drug use, is money well spent.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Support for Current Measures and Policies to Alleviate the Drug Problem

There has been a noticeable change in support for early education prevention, those who did not know also increased. There is a decrease in perception that money spent in the drug prevention is money well spent.

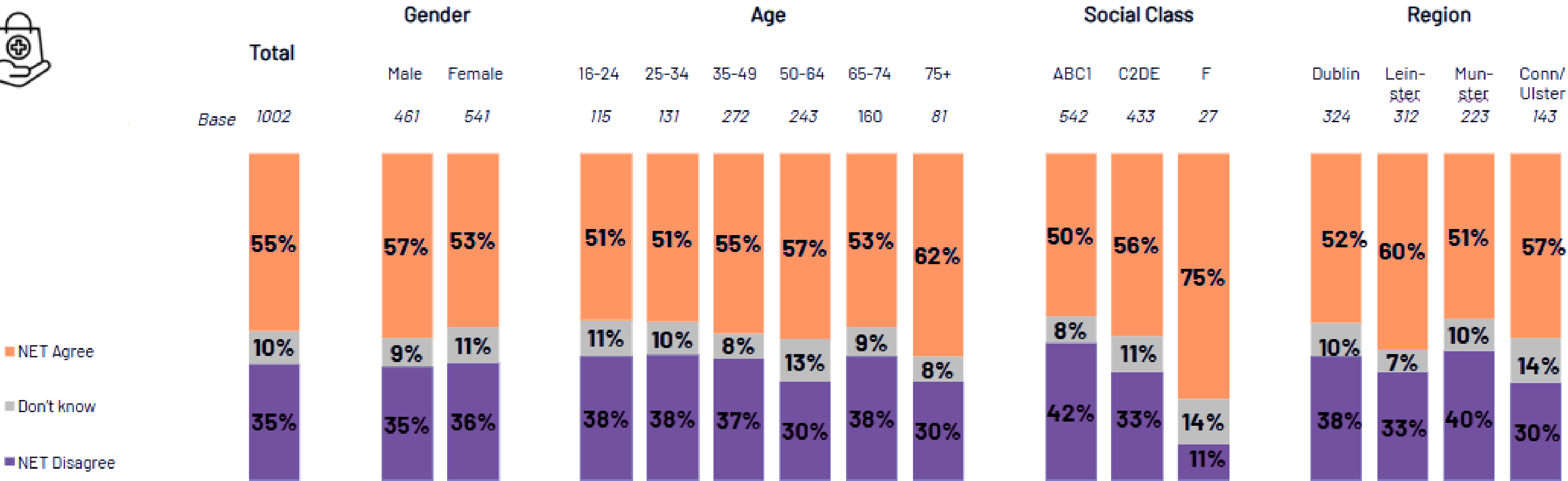
Statement	KABS 2000 (%)			ABS 2025 (%)			Agreed Change
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	
Drug education in school should start at primary level.	94.5	2.3	3.2	79	13	8	↓ Decrease
Money spent on the prevention of drug use, is money well spent.	91.6	4.1	4.3	82	9	8	↓ Decrease

SUPPORT FOR DRUG TREATMENT STRATEGIES

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Treatment should only be given to people who are drug dependent who intend to give up drugs for good.

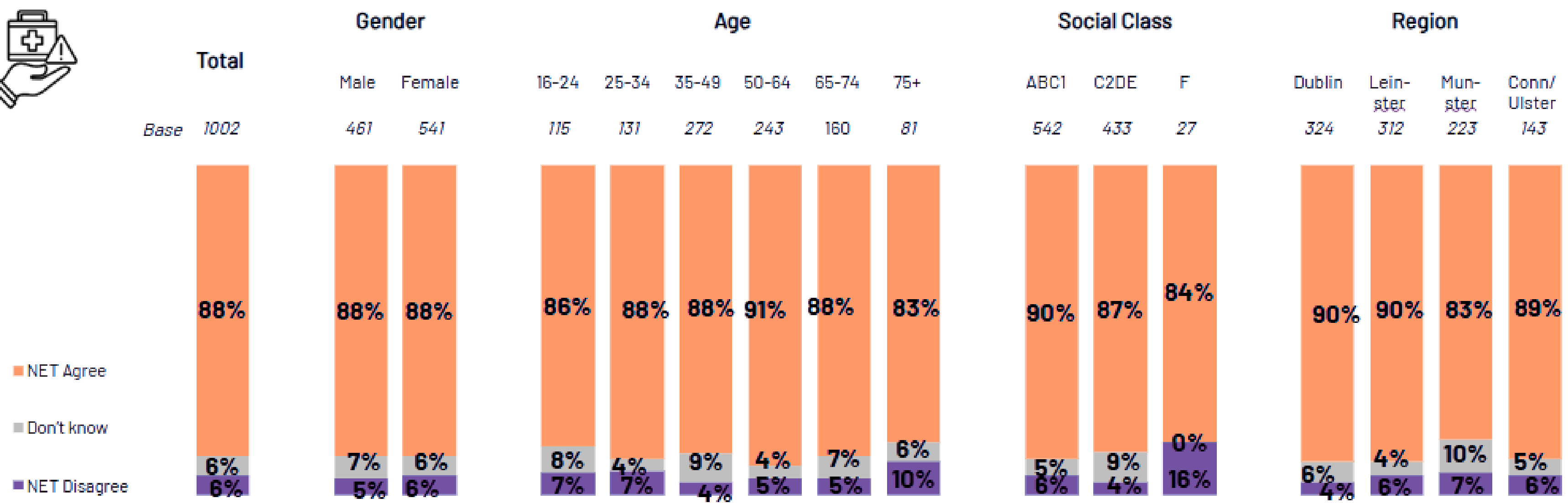
Mixed views on the extent to which treatment should be made widely available, with a slight majority feeling it should only be given to those who intend to quit drug use completely



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q8. Treatment should only be given to drug addicts who intend to give up drugs for good.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Treatment should be available to all people who are drug dependent, according to their needs.

Broad agreement with the sentiment of providing needs-based treatment to all people who are drug dependent



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q18. Treatment should be available to all drug addicts, according to their needs.
Base: All Adults N - 1002

Support for Drug Treatment Strategies

Support for treatment remains strong.

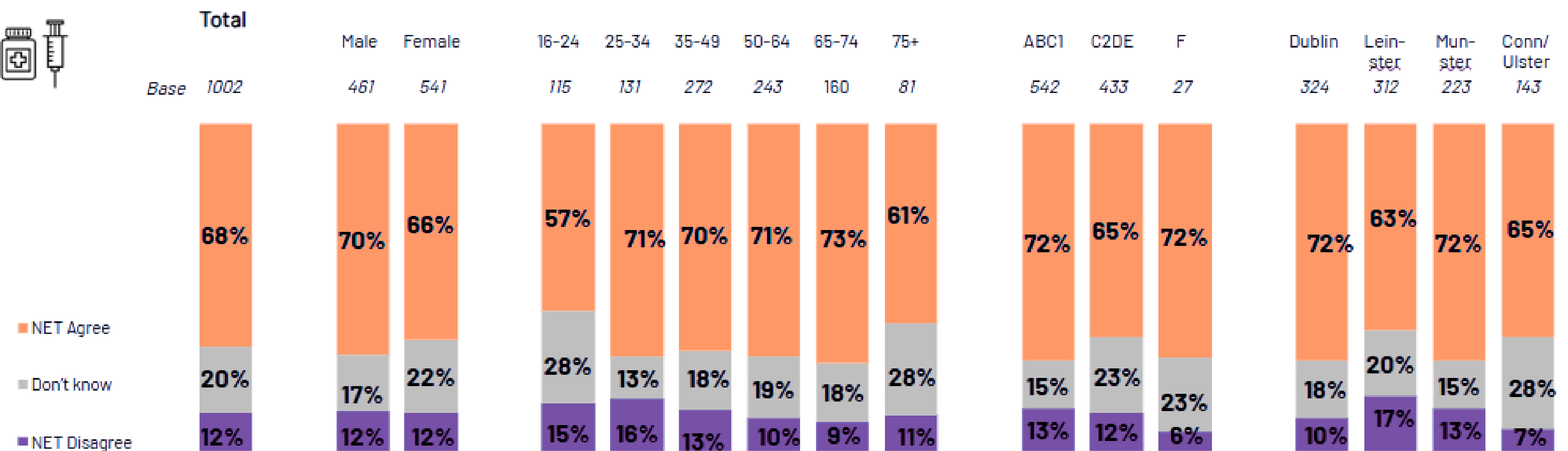
Statement	KABS 2000 (%)			ABS 2025 (%)			Agreed Change
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	
Treatment should only be given to drug addicts who intend to give up drugs for good.	64.5	27.3	8.2	55	35	10	↓ Decrease
Treatment should be available to all drug addicts, according to their needs.	90.2	3.7	6.1	88	6	6	↓ Slight Decrease

SUPPORT FOR HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES

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Medically prescribed heroin substances [such as methadone/physeptone] should be available to people who are drug dependent.

Just over two-thirds believe the medically prescribed heroin substances should be available to people who are drug dependent

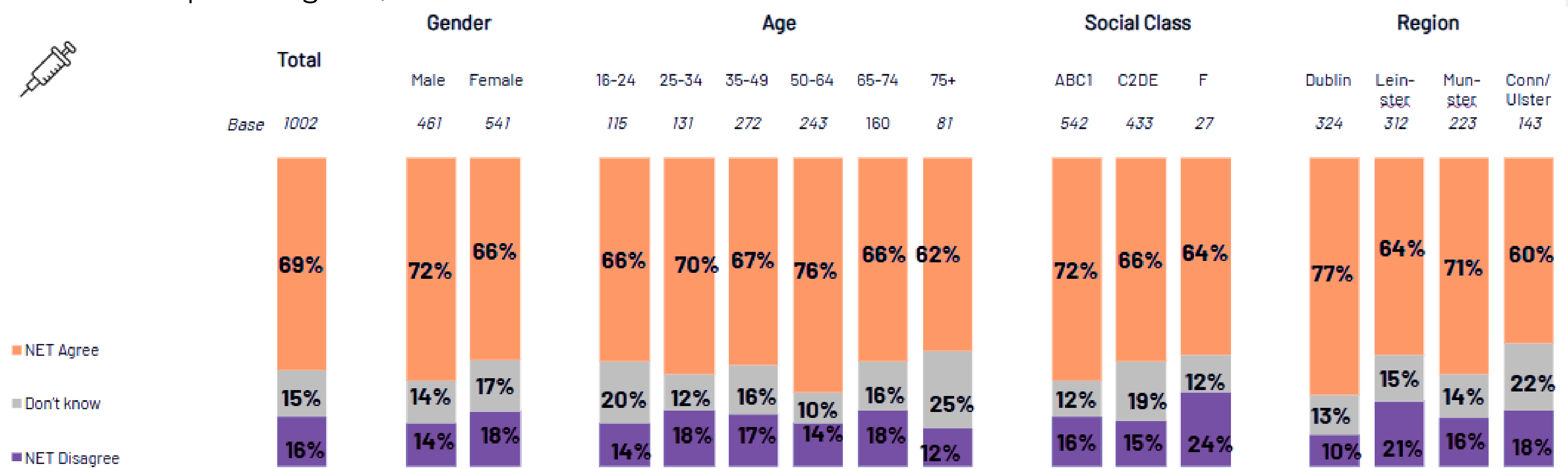


Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q26. Medically prescribed heroin substances [such as methadone/physeptone] should be available to drug addicts.

Base: All Adults N - 1002

Society should provide syringes and needles free of charge to people who are drug dependent to avoid the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The majority of all groups believe that people who are drug dependent should be provided with syringes and needles to avoid spreading HIV/AIDS



Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree that ... Q32. Society should provide syringes and needles free of charge to drug addicts to avoid the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Base: All Adults N - 1002

Support for Harm Reduction Strategies

There has been an increase in support for harm reduction strategies suggesting a more health-oriented understanding and approach to drug policy.

Statement	KABS 2000 (%)			ABS 2025 (%)			Agreed Change
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	
Medically prescribed heroin substances [such as methadone/physe ptone] should be available to drug addicts.	63.5	16.1	20.3	68	12	20	↑ Increase
Society should provide syringes and needles free of charge to drug addicts to avoid the spread of HIV/AIDS.	66.7	17.3	15.9	69	16	15	↑ Increase

Broader Implications

The changes in public attitudes and beliefs about drug use and dependency between 2000 and 2025 in Ireland have several important social, policy, and public health implications.

Shift Toward a Health-Based Approach	Reduced Stigma and Increased Empathy	Generational Divides
<p>The decline in viewing people who are drug dependent as criminals and the increase in support for treatment and harm reduction strategies suggest a growing acceptance of drug use and dependency as a health issue rather than a moral failing.</p> <p>Policy Impact: This supports the expansion of public health services, including low-threshold treatment access, harm reduction programs, and integrated care models.</p>	<p>Despite some positive shifts, a significant portion of the population still expresses fear and avoidance of people who are drug dependent. The reduction in fear and avoidance of people who are drug dependent, especially among younger and more educated populations, indicates a cultural shift toward empathy and understanding.</p> <p>Social Impact: People who are drug dependent may continue to face social exclusion, which can hinder recovery, reintegration, and access to support networks. Continued targeted efforts could lead to greater social inclusion for people in recovery, reduced discrimination in housing and employment, and more community-based support initiatives.</p>	<p>Younger people are more likely to hold progressive views on drug use and dependency.</p> <p>Policy Impact: Tailored public awareness campaigns may be needed to reach older demographics, who are more likely to hold punitive or fearful views.</p>

Broader Implications

Support for Harm Reduction and Treatment	Alcohol as a Parallel Concern	References
<p>High support for needs-based treatment, but there remains mixed views on abstinence requirements. Increased support for harm reduction strategies and treatment access reflects a readiness for more progressive drug policy.</p> <p>Policy/Public Health Impact: Policymakers can build on this support to expand services like supervised injection facilities, mobile outreach, and community-based detox and rehab programs, and ensuring services are accessible and non-judgmental.</p>	<p>Alcohol is still perceived as a serious societal issue.</p> <p>Policy Impact: These findings open the door for integrated substance use strategies that address both legal and illegal substances, including alcohol harm reduction and education.</p>	<p>Abuse, N. I. on D. (2021, November 29). Words Matter—Terms to Use and Avoid When Talking About Addiction National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). https://nida.nih.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/health-professions-education/words-matter-terms-to-use-avoid-when-talking-about-addiction</p> <p>Bryan, A., Farrell, E., Moran, R., & O'Brien, M. (2000). Drug-related knowledge, attitudes and beliefs in Ireland: Report of a nation-wide survey. Drug Misuse Research Division, Health Research Board.</p> <p>Corrigan, P. W., & Shapiro, J. R. (2010a). Measuring the impact of programs that challenge the public stigma of mental illness. <i>Clinical Psychology Review</i>, 30(8), 907–922. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.06.004</p> <p>Fox, A. B., Earnshaw, V. A., Taverna, E. C., & Vogt, D. (2018). Conceptualizing and measuring mental illness stigma: The Mental Illness Stigma Framework and critical review of measures. <i>Stigma and Health</i>, 3(4), 348–376. https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000104</p> <p>Goffman, E. (1963). <i>Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity</i>. Simon and Schuster.</p> <p>Jones, E. E., Farina, A., Hastorf, A. H., Marcus, H., Miller, D. T., & Scott, R. A. (1984). Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.230.4725.535.b</p> <p>Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i>, 27(1), 363–385. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.363</p> <p>Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination Against People with Mental Illness. (n.d.). Retrieved 21 May 2025, from https://www.psychiatry.org:443/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination</p>

THANK YOU

Many thanks to Behaviours and Attitudes and to the 1002 participants who took part in the survey.

Survey conducted by Kieran O' Leary of Behaviour and Attitudes on behalf of Merchants Quay Ireland.

Additional work conducted by Dr Ronda Barron, Merchants Quay Ireland